

Trauma and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*

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ABSTRACT. This article looks at 9/11 trauma and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder in Don DeLillo's *Falling Man*. This asserts that 9/11 has brought about not only political, social, economic and cultural consequences but also caused victims on the personal level. This paper demonstrates how Keith, the protagonist of the novel, has been affected by 9/11. In other words, this article examines Keith's traumatic experience of witnessing his close friend's death, the falling man, and escaping his own impending death in the north tower and how these horrible scenes affect Keith's perception of self. Eventually, this study concludes that DeLillo's *Falling Man* presents the reality of what the survivors have experienced during and after the attacks, and the complication of trauma and PTSD that turns their world topsy-turvy.

1. INTRODUCTION

According to D'Alessio & Eidelsonstate:

"An entire nation was stunned by the destruction of life and property brought on by the crashing of four passenger airliners into the World Trade Center in New York City, the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and a field outside of Shanks Ville, Pennsylvania. Ultimately, over 3,000 lives were lost and countless others were forever changed in both obvious and immeasurable ways. The disaster was experienced not only directly by thousands of individuals but repeatedly by millions of television viewers from around the world (2003: 144)".

It is probably right to say that the world has been already changed even before the attacks, but the West world was not awakened till those hijacked planes crashed into the WTC and the other targets on 9/11.

Many writers aroused a query about how the future of the fiction will be after this rupture. The future of fiction needed a decade after the traumatic incident to realize how it would be. In *Ground Zero's History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novels*, Birgit Däwes states that "by the end of June 2011, at least 231 novels from around the world are available in print which can be classified as '9/11 novels' (2011: 6). Dawes later suggested that "if it seems, at first glance, that all of these texts share the same historical tenor, they are, in fact, marked by a notable degree of diversity" (2011: 6).

Some novelists have tackled the traumatic events of that 9/11terrorist attacks head on such as Frederic Beigbeder's *Windows on The World* (2003), Lynne Sharon Schwartz's *The Writing on The Wall* (2004), Jonathan SafranFoer's *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*(2005), Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* (2006), Jay McInerney's *The Good Life* (2006), Ken Kalfus's *A Disorder Peculiar to the Country*(2006) among others.; some other novelists have utilized the scene as a catalyst for looking at the Western world, America in a particular, shivered of its being complacent. Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) depicts the most horrifying moments that day: "By the time the second plane appears" while Keith and Lianne were watching a video tape to review the attacks, Keith comments: "we're all a little older and wiser" (2007: 135).

Baelo-Allué states that "In the case of 9/11 the degree of traumatic response was different for those who were inside the towers, those that witnessed it live outside the towers, and those who watched

it on TV” (2012: 64), like Keith who was in the north tower during the event. According to Kaplan, there are different kinds of victims/witnesses as she mentions that:

Equally important to trauma is one’s specific positioning vis-à-vis an event. For this reason, it is necessary to distinguish the different positions and contexts of encounters with trauma. At one extreme there is the direct trauma victim while at the other we find a person geographically far away, having no personal connection to the victim. In between are a series of positions....People encounter trauma by being a bystander, by living near to where the catastrophe happened, or by hearing about a crisis from a friend. (Trauma Culture: 2)

In Fact, *Falling Man* reproduces the traumatic events in the survivors’ memory and the aftermath of the terrorist attack and its traumatic consequences on their identities and selves. If survivors want to defeat their personal trauma they have to comprehend their traumatic memories and save them as traumatic memory. They have to try to express what they experienced. Due to the traumatic event the protagonist in *Falling Man* struggles to recognize his identity and self. This article attempts to examine DeLillo’s demonstration of how one’s identity can be changed and complicated because of a severe trauma, and how a trauma threatens the core of existence of man. PTSD is not just a matter of feeling “different”. Consequently, a trauma victim questions not only who s/he is, but also if s/he is.

2. TRAUMA

Undoubtedly the nature of human psyche is output of a mixture of diverse experiences a human tries out through his/her life. Some of these experiences are joyful; others are unhappy which may cause a trauma to a person who is subjected to a hard event or witnesses it. In this point, a question comes to mind: Does trauma occur only for an individual or for a community alike? Actually both can experience it. An individual or a society could be traumatized due to being exposed to two types of events: acts of war/ terrorism/political violence such as shooting, bombing, and looting, or accidents resulting from actions of individuals who act in isolation according to political ideologies. Then, what a trauma is?

Caruth defines “Psychic trauma is a wound inflicted upon the mind that breaks the victim’s experience of time, self and the world and that cause great emotional anguish in the individual (1996: 3-4). Furthermore, Van der Kolk explains the complicated nature of trauma by saying, “Traumatization occurs when both internal and external resources are inadequate to cope with external threat (1996: 393). The psychologists Green and McNally distinguish three aspects of psychic trauma: “the event, its subjective perception, and the psychological reaction to that event” (2003: 78).

According to Caruth, 'The event is not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated possession of the one who experiences it. To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (1991: 3). Soon after the incident, shock as well as denial is expected reaction to traumatic incidents and catastrophe. This reaction is normally protective. Shock is an unexpected, immediate, and intensified confusion of our emotions which makes us feel bewildered and disoriented, and at the same time, denial involves the refusal of the disaster as having happened.

Longer term reactions involve unexpected emotions, tensed relationships, flashbacks, and even physical symptoms such as headaches or nausea. Some consider these feelings as normal; while others face difficulty to go on with their lives. “Survivors of personal traumatic experiences may suffer from Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which is a delayed response that takes the form of repeated flashbacks, hallucinations, nightmares, somatic reactions, behaviors stemming from the event and general numbing”(Van der Kolk and Van der Hart: 1995: 173). Over the time, traumatized one’s self shows signs of change as Berntsen and Rubin assume that self-change occurs because memories of the trauma are highly accessible and easily evoked, and hence, the trauma event becomes perceived over time as ‘a major causal agent’ and thus a highly salient turning point in the person’s life’ (2006: 221).

3. TRAUMA AND POST-TRAUMATIC DISORDER OF THE PROTAGONIST

The main events of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* largely revolve around the daily lives of an American couple, Keith Neudecker and his ex-wife, Lianne, who are influenced by the terrorist attacks of 9/11. Although these attacks have shed its consequences over the world not just on America, the novel concentrates on the everyday strife of these two key characters since they suffer the traumatic experience of September 11th.

The opening scene of *Falling Man* begins with depicting the state of Keith as he was walking down the streets soon after the hijacked planes, by al-Qaeda terrorists, had crashed the World Trade Center. In spite of his being in the towers, Keith managed to get away. DeLillo narrates that "confused and wounded there was glass in his face and hair, marbled bolls of light and blood" (3). DeLillo portrays the horrible chaotic scene of terrified and frightened "people running past holding towels to their faces or jackets over their heads...they ran and fell ...there were people taking shelter under cars...with smoke and ash...rolling down streets and turning corners...seismic tides of smoke" (2007: 3). It became clear as Keith was going away, DeLillo narrates "he heard the sound of the second fall, or felt it in the trembling air, the north tower coming down, and a soft awe of voices in the distance. That was him coming down, the north tower" (2007: 5). Through these last lines, DeLillo provides an indication that there is a particular connection between Keith and the north tower that most probably his office is in. This point of time declares Keith's access to be not only a witness but also a direct traumatized victim "He tried to tell himself he was alive but the idea was too obscure to take hold" (2007: 6).

He attempts to find his way away from what is happening around him. Finally, he reaches Lianne's apartment, his estranged wife. Lianne and her mother Nina indicate the traumatic circumstances of Keith's escaping and survival, as well as the repetitious conditions of the terrorist attack on WTC as Lianne says "But when the tower fell." "I know" "when this happened" "I know" "I thought he was dead" and Nina replies "So did I," and she adds "So many watching. Thinking he's dead, she's dead." "I know." "Watching those buildings fall." "First one, then the other, I know," her mother said (2007: 11). Following the daily lives of Keith and Lianne, through the course of the novel, and observing as they grapple and consent to receive that the world is no longer as it was "this was the world now" (DeLillo: 3). Because of being traumatized, before the end of the novel, the lives of Keith and Lianne are changed and actually there is no chance to return to the previous normal life. It comes to be clear that how their lives became different now through watching their moving out of the initial after-effect (the initial shock) of the traumatic event, to experience the traumatic injury into a long period from the aftermath.

Yet, before his fleeing, the picture of what Keith traumatically experiences becomes clearer and how that had done a shock to him. In addition to his presence when the planes hit the towers, witnessing thousands of panic people who were escaping for their lives and his witnessing the death of Rumsey, his close friend, leads Keith to realize that a horrible thing happened. When Keith finds him, on the verge of death, obviously Rumsey is being in bad condition Keith squatted alongside and took his (Rumsey) arm and looked at the man, talking to him. Keith saw something dripping like bile from Rumsey's mouth, the mark on his head, a gouge symptom and his raw tissue and nerve are deeply exposed. Nevertheless, Keith did not give up trying to fetch him down the stairs with other people but he soon realized that his endeavors were vain as he saw him falling apart "He (Keith) held tight to the belt buckle. Keith stood and looked at him and the man opened his eyes and died. This was when he (Keith) wondered what was happening here" (DeLillo: 243). Keith's confusion is a clear-cut evidence of his traumatization, as he is unable to fully realize the severe events and the terrible scenes that are revolving around him.

During exposure to traumatic events, a trauma victim is not completely conscious and does not fully realize what has happened to him/her until later. Responses of people who are traumatized vary from person to another. Reactions of some are stronger to such incidents than others. Or two persons may develop different kinds of psychological symptoms and responses in reaction to trauma. Witnessing dread of some people and death of others bring about a break in human psyche. Thus, a state of unconsciousness is demonstrated by Keith through his remembering himself as he

was leaving the towers: “They walked down, thousands, and Keith was in there with them. He walked in a long sleep, one step and then the next” (DeLillo: 243). Depicting the state of Keith “in a long sleep” while he was walking physically but psychologically he is absent. Consequently, a psychological problem and PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) can be caused by this psychological separation.

The trauma of the incident and its impact on Keith is then further revealed when he is attempting to escape the scene. In *Unclaimed Experience*, Caruth points out that “What causes, trauma, then, is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind’s experience of time” (1995: 61). That what it is seen with Keith while he was leaving the towers: “Someone took his arm and led him forward for a few steps and then he walked on his own, in his sleep, and for an instant he had seen it again, going past the window, and this time he thought it was Rumsey” (2007: 244). The shock of seeing the falling man made him unable to recognize anything well. After he had witnessed Rumsey’s death in the tower and the falling man Keith was unaware or almost unconscious of all what was happening around him. He had lost the sense of time and place and he was unable to understand what he saw and unable to fully realize everything. Obviously, Keith’s state and behavior reflects how he has been psychologically affected and how he will most likely experience the long term effects of PTSD.

Carlson & Ruzek suggest that “survivors may have problems with identity when PTSD symptoms change important aspects of a person’s life such as relationships or whether the person can do his or her work well. A person may also question his or her identity because of the way he or she acted during a trauma.” (2013: 6). Through Keith’s suffer and struggle with his identity, DeLillo depicts the consequences and complications of what a trauma victim suffers relating to his/her identity. After he had had the initial shock in the tower, it has become obvious that several identity crises Keith has gone through, each crisis has a connection to symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. The concept of self has become unclear to Keith as he questioned it, not exactly knowing who he is within his own body. Then, a two-fold doubling of identity seemed to be seen as Keith is distinguishing between who he was before September 11th and who he is after, also when he tried to suit his relationship with Florence, he develops a different identity.

With regards to Keith’s response to the lost sense of self, Herman states that “Traumatic events call into question basic human relationships... They shatter the construction of the self that is formed and sustained in relation to others... They violate the victim’s faith in a natural or divine order and cast the victim into a state of existential crisis” (1992: 51). This shattering or questioning is reflected through Keith’s going back to take his things out of his old apartment, DeLillo narrates that “A single suitcase, that was all, and birth certificate, his passport, checkbooks and a few other documents, the state papers of identity. He stood and looked and felt something so lonely he could touch it with his hand” (2007: 27). Here, reviewing the items that set his identity, Keith now feels lonely. It is clear that his feeling that those artifacts identify a person he does not have a connection to. Indeed, he feels like a different one fully. By his looking in the refrigerator, DeLillo writes “Maybe he was thinking of the man who used to live here and he checked the bottles and cartons for clues” (2007: 27). It can be said that because not making the connection between his old self (before 9/11) and his new one (after 9/11) by Keith, he feels that he is in else’s home.

Moreover, it should have a closer look to Keith’s case when he seems that he lost his feeling human by his wondering if he had been transforming to be like a humanoid robot, a self-operating mechanism that has the ability to comprehend hundreds of voices and commands. Certainly, as a result to his trauma, Keith’s experiencing to things around him has changed. No longer has he clearly known his personality. The question exceeds the fact that he asks who he is to his feeling like that he is several selves. Lifton states that “extreme trauma creates a second self... then one’s sense of self is radically altered in extreme trauma. And there is a traumatized self that is created... It’s a form of doubling in the traumatized person” (1995: 128).

This is shown through not only the Keith’s state before September 11 versus his own after, but also through his relationship with Florence. Shortly after Keith’s getting his things from his old apartment, he begins establishing a new life with his wife and son. Yet, Keith feels that he is not the

same person he was when he had been living with them in the days before 9/11. At some point, as DeLillo narrates, “Keith feels nothing seems familiar, being here, in his family again, and he feels strange to himself” (2007: 5). Here, Keith's self-awareness of his being knowing his family increases more than before and how he no longer feels the same way he used to. When he and his wife have discussed a family trip in the past he re-affirms the self-awareness as he recalls “We saw falcons perched on power lines....when we went to somewhere west, back in the other life. The other life, Lianne said laughing and pushing up off the chair, headed for the bathroom” (DeLillo: 131).

Again, this different self/life is seen when Keith starts his new job as a semi-professional poker player, he becomes more of a part-time husband as well a part-time father. He goes home occasionally, performing his duty as a husband and a father, “home-cooked food, but was lost at times for something to say. There was no language; it seemed, to tell them how he spent his days and nights” (DeLillo 197). Although Keith physically returns to his family, he is still separated from them psychologically as if he was a new person, someone isolated from his family.

When Lianne looks at Keith, she also sees a different person. He tried to play ball trick, using the right undamaged hand, “to flip the ball onto the back of the hand and then jerk the arm forward propelling the ball backwards along the forearm before knocking it into the air with his elbow and then catching it backhanded, she saw a man she'd never known before” (DeLillo: 59). Keith seems to be not just a different person; he is fully new one, a person that Lianne has never ever known. This is not different from Keith's feeling about himself. DeLillo also displays Keith's new double identities when Keith simultaneously establishes relationships with both Lianne, his estranged wife, and Florence, a fellow 9/11 survivor.

In *Recovery from psychological trauma*, Herman states that “The core experiences of psychological trauma are disempowerment and disconnection from others.” (1998: 145). Erikson suggests a cure to the above dilemma as cited in *Recovery from psychological trauma*: “Recovery therefore is based upon empowerment of the survivor and the creation of new connections. Recovery can take place only within the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation” (1998: 145); therefore Keith tries to turn his traumatic memory into narrative memory as he struggles in his urge to know and his need to deny. And that what makes him turn to look for a new relationship which starts when he meets Florence. She shares Keith the same experience, she also fled the World Trade Center Towers and she lost her friend too. Keith seeks her out to return her briefcase which somehow ended up to him when he was escaping the scene on September 11th. , they directly start to talk about the calamity. Talking paves the way for their relationship.

Many trauma victims look for each other to exchange their stories so this kind of relationship is familiar among those who are trauma survivors. Commonly, traumatized people try to look for each other to exchange the critical moments they have been through being exposed to same psychological wound, Caruth says that “the wound that speaks is...but the wound, the trauma, of another... the way in which, therefore, trauma may lead to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound” (1996: 8).

It is clear Keith's wanting to be listener to Florence's traumatic wound, or feeling her wound. Keith always recalls their conversations and how Florence talks repeatedly about the tragic event, the suffocating smoke, the scene of the scattered bodies, and he realized that only they can talk about these things together to the dullest detailed. But it was never dull to him because he wanted to hear any lost details. In doing so they reached the highest degree of delirium, the stunned reality the men and women have shared there. Although Keith and Florence do not share anything but a traumatic experience, he feels deeply connected to her.

Another identity is developed by Keith to get this relationship he wants with Florence. DeLillo narrates “They took erotic pleasure from each other but this is not what sent him back there. It was what they knew together, in the timeless drift of the long spiral down, and he went back again even if these meetings contradicted what he'd lately taken to be the truth of his life, that it was meant to be lived seriously and responsibly, not snatched in clumsy fistfuls” (2007: 137). Keith needs this

relationship, despite the fact that it disagrees with all that he imagines he needs in his new life with his wife and son.

Indeed, Keith has the capacity perceive the fragmentation he has endured. At a certain point, while he is walking with Justin, his son, he thinks about his affair with Florence, DeLillo depicts Keith being absent-minded as he was talking into the air, not exactly to his son "He was still back there, with Florence, double in himself, coming and going, the walks across the park and back, the deep shared self, down through the smoke, and then here again to safety and family, to the implications of one's conduct" (2007: 157). It didn't take him too long to realize that he has to stop meeting Florence if he wants to stay with his wife. He thinks this will be "a way to stop being double in himself, trailing the taut shadow of what is unsaid" (2007: 161).

Keith admits that he does not desire his new life; he has more than one self which are contradictory and conflicting, some of them are trying to hinder his wishes to transform into a new person after 9/11. Here, Keith's life has changed internally and externally. In terms of the internal aspect, he has lost his clear recognition of himself. His feeling that his life in doubling puts himself in a permanent plight relating to who he was pre-9/11 and who he is post-9/11 becoming. As well, he is split between two lives one with Lianne and other with Florence.

4. CONCLUSION

Through the experience Keith, the protagonist of *Falling Man*, has coped and suffered, this essay discusses how DeLillo shows the complication of trauma and PTSD. To be traumatized fundamentally turns his world topsy-turvy, he is left with no support and nothing gives a feeling of safety. The most piteous aspect of Keith's role is represented by his inability to go forward through his new life. He is haunted by the images of his close friend, Rumsey, his own experience when he confronted with his impending death and witnessing death of many people or other fleeing in horror. In the end, he has chosen a career that kept him away from his wife and son and provides him no stability.

9/11 attacks not only has changed the cultural, social, economic and political aspects of the world but also the lives of the persons who were there. Through Keith's state, DeLillo depicts the reality of what and how those survivors have experienced during and after the attacks on the World Trade Center. DeLillo proves the image of how one's self can be changed and complicated because of a severe trauma. PTSD is not simply an issue that the traumatized person feels himself "different" but tormenting fragmentation and contradictory and conflicting selves drive selfhood to be complicated. Traumatized victims people wonder who they are, as well as if they are.

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